

Think on These Things

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This Little Church Went to the Market, The Market-Driven Church, Pt. 2 by Gary E. Gilley, Pastor-

David Wells bemoans concerning the new paradigm church, "Much of it...is replete with tricks, gadgets, gimmicks, and marketing ploys as it shamelessly adapts itself to our emptied-out, blinded, postmodern world. ... There is too little about it that bespeaks the holiness of God. And without the vision for any reality of this holiness, the gospel becomes trivialized, life loses its depth, God becomes transformed into a product to be sold, faith into a recreational activity to be done, and the Church into a club for the like-minded" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 180). Damaging accusations; are they true?

The standard rhetoric coming from new paradigm churches is that they teach the same message, the same gospel, as the more traditional evangelical churches, they differ only in methodology and philosophy of ministry. Lee Strobel (former Teaching Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church) writes, "Objections [to the market-driven church] generally relate to the method that's used to communicate the Gospel, not the message itself, and consequently we're free to use our God-given creativity to present Christ's message in new ways that our target audience will connect with" (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 168). This is simply not the case. While some of the methods may disturb us it is their message that is of real concern. In Part 4 of this series we will demonstrate that while the new paradigm churches have dressed their gospel in the gown of conservative evangelicalism, it is in reality a masquerade, a costume, that disguises a gospel message that would have been unrecognizable only a few years ago. For now we need to examine the methodologies for which the new paradigm churches have become famous: their market-driven strategies. After all, that the new paradigm churches are most often known by the handle of "market-driven" is not without reason. We have chosen not to use this label

exclusively because these churches are unique in other ways as well, but their market-driven approach is certainly their outstanding feature.

What Is a Market-Driven Church?

Some within the market-driven church would cringe at being called such. They would rather be hailed "purpose-driven" (so Rick Warren's influential book *The Purpose-Driven Church*), or "seeker-sensitive" (a.k.a. Bill Hybels). But others such as George Barna (the most highly regarded marketing researcher in evangelicalism) pulls no punches. In works such as *Marketing the Church* and *A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, Barna outlines for pastors who have not had the privilege of a graduate course in marketing (*A Step-by-Step Guide to Church Marketing*, p. 15), just how it is to be done in the church. As to the debate within evangelical circles concerning marketing, Barna declares it to be over and the marketing gurus have won (p. 13-14).

If this is true (and as one visits churches all over the country from liberal to conservative and observes their mimicking of market-driven principles one would have to agree that Barna has a good case), what exactly has been won (or lost, depending upon your view)?

Barna defines marketing as "a broad term that encompasses all of the activities that lead to an exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties." Barna moves on to give supposed examples of marketing in Scripture, including examples of marketing the gospel (cf. pp. 20,23,77). Unfortunately, in order to support his marketing strategy from Scripture, he must twist its meaning. For example, Barnabas is given as an example of a marketing strategy (p. 23). Barna writes, "Barnabas successfully tackled a tough marketing or "PR" assignment

when he overcame the early disciples' fear of Paul, convincing them he was no longer a persecutor of the church" (Acts 9:26,27) (p. 23). Jesus also owed His fame to marketing, according to Barna (p. 23), because word of mouth is "the world's most effective advertising." By his definition, all proclamation of any Christian message is an act of marketing. He is then saying that all churches market, but some do not know it; the new paradigm churches simply have taken marketing to a new level. But the marketing philosophy is a very different approach from the methods found in Scripture to spread the good news, as I hope to demonstrate in these papers, but for now look at his definition of marketing. Is the gospel marketable by this definition? Is the gospel the "exchange of equally valued goods between consenting parties?" Let's see. The gospel is offered by grace (undeserved favor) and received by faith. In the exchange God gets us, we get Him (equally valued goods?). In the exchange we receive the righteousness of Christ, He takes our sins upon Himself (equally valued goods?). The market process breaks down in its very definition when the "product" is Christ.

But is Christ the product of the market-driven approach? Barna would say yes but note his explanation: "Ministry, in essence, has the same objective as marketing: to meet people's needs. Christian ministry, by definition, meets people's real needs by providing them with biblical solutions to their life circumstances" (p. 21). Although not so stated, I am certain if questioned Barna would say we meet people's real need by bringing them to Christ (please keep in mind that "ministry," to the new paradigm churches, which have become evangelistic centers, means their efforts to bring Unchurched Harry to Christ). But is the purpose of the gospel to meet the felt-needs of people? Is that why Christ came? We will study this subject in detail in our next paper but at this point we must at least strongly protest such an understanding of the gospel.

The gospel is not bringing people to Christ in order to meet their felt-needs. ***According to Scripture the gospel is the good news that lost sinners can be forgiven of their sins and receive the righteousness of Christ in exchange.*** This is the real need of humanity, the need for which Christ died. The new paradigm church would have no problem agreeing that Harry's true need is salvation from sin. But they do not believe that Harry will respond to such a gospel unless we dress it up with other enticing offers. Felt-needs is the porthole, they believe, through which Harry is reached in order that his true spiritual need is met. According to their marketing

research Harry is not interested in truth (*Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, by Lee Strobel, p. 56); therefore, he does not react well to "Thus sayeth the Lord" (Ibid., p. 50). And Harry is not interested in the future (including heaven) (Ibid., p. 57); therefore reaching him through concern for his eternal destiny is futile. What Harry is interested in is feeling better about himself. He is asking, "What can help me deal with my pain" (Ibid., p. 56); he is interested in "his marriage, his friendships, his career, his recovery from past pain and so on" (Ibid., pp. 58, 59). Unchurched Mary, for her part is attracted to churches, "Where women have access to leadership and influence" (Ibid., 76), (i.e. an equalitarian approach). If we are to reach this generation we must then "market" the gospel as something that works (i.e. relieves pain and provides happiness).

"The most effective messages for seekers are those that address their felt-needs" (Ibid., pp. 213-214). However, this approach is not drawn from Scripture, it is drawn from market research, and the latest in pop-psychology. No one denies that there are many benefits to the Christian life, but these benefits must not be confused with the gospel. The gospel is not about helping Harry feel better about himself and his circumstances; it is about his rebelliousness against a holy God who will ultimately condemn him to hell if he does not repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins. The distinction between the market-driven approach and the biblical approach lies largely in understanding this fundamental difference.

Market Evaluation

Given the obvious fact that market-driven methodology works (almost all of the biggest and fastest growing churches in America have hopped aboard the market-driven train), and granted that we are a pragmatic people who worship at the feet of the goddess success, what serious flaws could be found in the movement? Below are some things to consider.

Big is good, small is bad; or where have all the people gone?

Most churches in America are small. Fifty percent of churches average fewer than 75 attendees on any given Sunday and only 5 percent attract more than 350 according to Barna's surveys. These statistics are not denied: it's their interpretation that is in question. Church growth gurus use these figures to prove that the church has lost its edge – she is not making a significant impact

on society. But is this the case? David Wells shares his thoughts, "A century ago, in 1890...the average Protestant church had only 91.5 members, not all of whom would have been in attendance on any given Sunday; a century before that, in 1776, the average Methodist congregation had 75.7 members. It seems to be the case that our churches today are about the same size as they have always been, on average, and the supposition that we are now experiencing drastic shrinkage needs to be clearly justified before it can be allowed to become the premise for new and radical strategies" (*God in the Wasteland*, by David Wells, p. 78). As a matter of fact, church attendance in 1937 averaged 41% of the population, whereas it was 42% in 1988, (close to 50% in the late 50s and 43% in 1999 according to *Christianity Today*, July 10, 2000, p. 20), leading Wells to comment, "Barna's efforts to make megachurches the benchmark of normality and then to argue that churches of conventional size are failures is simply unwarranted and wrongheaded" (*God in the Wasteland*, p. 79).

It doesn't take a mathematician to realize that if the percentage of Americans going to church has remained constant, yet megachurches are popping up almost weekly, then the giant churches are largely being populated by folks funneling in from small churches. Just as Wal-marts are killing mom and pop department stores, chain restaurants and groceries are doing the same in their respected venues, and the Mall has demolished "downtown," so the megachurches are doing a number on the small church. But large does not necessarily mean better, and when all the numbers are tallied, overall church attendance (on a percentage basis) is not increasing despite the methods championed by these megachurches.

Who needs God, we have a program?

We are certainly in danger of reductionism, but when such faith can be held in the marketing methodology, little room is left, or needed, for faith in God. In what has to be one of the most blatant examples of the self-sufficiency of marketing is the claim that the salvation of souls has a price tag. Barna suggests that a church might set an objective to "lead 50 baby busters to Christ this year, for under \$5000 in program expenditures" (Barna, p. 170). So for \$100 per head we can bring people to Christ. The need for prayer and trust in a sovereign God becomes questionable when we can statistically figure what it costs to bring a soul to the Lord. In Barna's defense this "souls/dollar" strategy is not new. Both Charles Finney and Billy Sunday could predict to the penny what it cost to win a soul, their cost however ran between \$2 and \$3 a head –

quite a bargain as compared to today. But of course if you factor in inflation you can apparently still win a soul pretty inexpensively.

Or take the church-growth consultant who boldly claims that "five to ten million baby boomers would be back in the fold within a month if churches adopted three simple changes: 1. Advertise 2. Let people know about "product benefits" 3. Be nice to new people (See *Dining with the Devil*, by Os Guinness, p. 38). The belief in the omnipotence of marketing techniques is changing the nature of the church.

The Consumer is King

The premise of all marketing is that the consumer must be pleased; he must be kept happy; he must be given what he needs, or has been programmed to think he needs, if we are to succeed. This premise works very well for say, McDonalds, but can it be adopted by the church? Certainly it can, but is not the church, and more importantly, the gospel message, altered and distorted in the process? Listen to these words by Wells, "The fact is that while we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. The church can offer handy childcare to weary parents, intellectual stimulation to the restless video generation, a feeling of family to the lonely and dispossessed – and, indeed, lots of people come to churches for these reasons. But neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the customer is always right and this is precisely what the gospel insists cannot be the case" (Wells, p. 82).

Even the *New Yorker* sees a problem with today's audience-driven preaching, "The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into the marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future" (As quoted by Guinness, p. 59).

But What if the Consumer Changes?

The following two quotes are worthy of pondering: "He who marries the spirit of the age soon becomes a widower." "To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal" (Guinness, p. 63). What happens when

the fickle consumer changes his interests, or develops new wants, as he inevitably will? Will today's cutting edge pastor suddenly find himself stampeded by the herd tomorrow? In order to avoid such a tragedy must he keep his ear to the ground of modern marketing techniques? Will he become a slave to polls and surveys? And how does all of this affect his use of the Scriptures? We don't have to have a crystal ball to answer these questions; all we have to do is look behind us. The church has always fought, and too often lost, the battle with its age. Parallels with today are plentiful. For example, the "Downgrade Controversy" of Spurgeon's time ultimately led to the liberalization of the evangelical churches of England. In our own country we think back to the early nineteenth-century changes that came about through the revivalism movement, best known by some as Finneyism. Guinness sees this as an important precedent because as in our time the change was not "so much from Calvinism to Arminianism as from theology to experience, from truth to technique, from elites to populism, and from an emphasis on 'serving God' to an emphasis on 'servicing the self' in serving God" (Guinness, p. 27). Some are still alive who experienced the great Fundamental/Modernist battle of the first half of the last century in which the big names of the church invited us to court the spirit of the age. The fad was so popular that almost every major denomination in America eventually married that spirit and moved away from biblical Christianity. It was at that point that new fundamentalist denominations, churches, schools, and associations were formed. It is these very institutions that are now flirting with the spirit of our age. The results are predictable.

Origen, in the third century, taught that "Christians are free to 'plunder the Egyptians' but forbidden to 'set up a golden calf' from the spoils" (Guinness., pp. 30,31). Easily said, but as history has proven, almost impossible to implement.

Michel Horton summarizes things well, "By the time we are finished, we have entirely transformed the communion of saints. We did not even have to officially jettison the Bible, as the modernists did earlier this century. We did not have to say that Scripture failed to provide answers for the modern world or speak to the real needs of contemporary men and women, as the liberals said. All we had to do was to allow the world to define the church instead of allowing the Word to define it" (*The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, edited by John H. Armstrong, "Recovering the Plumb Line" by Michael S. Horton, p. 254).

Summary

When we speak of marketing the church we are not referencing such things as advertising church events, providing excellence in church programming, being kind to visitors, or providing ample parking. No one is arguing the importance and value of such things. Marketing, as defined by the new paradigm churches, goes much further because its focus is on what the consumer (Unchurched Harry) wants and thinks he needs, rather than on what God wants and what He says Harry needs. In other words, market-driven churches are built upon the foundation of polls, surveys and the latest techniques instead of upon the Word of God. In order to market a church to the unsaved the consumer must be given what he wants.

Since unsaved consumers do not desire God, or the things of God, they have to be enticed by something else. Thus the temptation then arises for a church to change, or at least hide, who they are so that they appeal to Unchurched Harry. Additionally, the church is tempted to alter its message to correspond with what Harry wants to hear and thinks he needs. The end result is a felt-need gospel that appeals to Harry's fallen nature in an effort to entice him to come to Christ, the ultimate felt-need supplier, so that he is fulfilled and feels better about himself. But, "Can churches really hide their identity without losing their religious character? Can the church view people as consumers without inevitably forgetting that they are sinners? Can the church promote the gospel as a product and not forget that those who buy it must repent? Can the church market itself and not forget that it does not belong to itself but to Christ? Can the church pursue success in the market place and not lose its biblical faithfulness" (*Losing Our Virtue*, by David Wells, p. 202)? I believe the answers to these questions are self-evident.

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